

INDIA –NEPAL TENSION IN 2016

The neighboring country Nepal has been in the news for some time now due to the Madhesi agitation, which has resulted in nearly 50 deaths since August. The Tarai region, which shares a border with India, is known as Madhesh, and its residents are referred to as Madhesis. Many Nepalis hold India responsible for their domestic crisis.

After Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's two visits to Nepal, Nepal-India relations had improved significantly, especially after India's swift assistance during the earthquake. However, now anti-India slogans are being raised. The reason behind this lies in Nepal's history and internal issues, including a lack of democratic maturity, corrupt Brahmin-dominated leadership, regional sentiments, and India's stance.

Reports from Nepal indicate a severe shortage of essential goods, including food and fuel, with a gas cylinder costing around 7,000 Indian rupees. The Indian government has officially denied supporting the Madhesi blockade, but it's alleged that India has been supporting it. The Madhesis have blocked supply routes to the hilly regions, which pass through their areas.

Interestingly, the most nationalist groups in Nepal today are the Brahmins and Chhetris, who migrated from India. The original inhabitants, such as the Newars and Mongoloid groups like Rai, Limbu, Sherpa, Tamang, Gurung, and Magar, are marginalized from power.

Nepal is geographically divided into three regions: the mountains (high-altitude areas), the hills (lower-altitude areas), and the Tarai or Madhesh (the plains bordering India). The Madhesh region is inhabited by people who share similarities with Indians, with castes like Tharu, Dusadh, and Yadav. Despite being Nepali citizens, they face discrimination and are often referred to as "Indian-origin" people in the media.

The Madhesis have been demanding their rights since the end of the monarchy in 2006, and an agreement was signed with the then-Prime Minister Girija Prasad Koirala in 2008, promising autonomy, proportional representation, and inclusion in the army and police. However, these promises were not incorporated into the new constitution, leading to further unrest.

Nepal's new constitution, declared on September 20, 2015, has left the Madhesi community dissatisfied. The main reason for this discontent is the delimitation of new parliamentary

constituencies, which has resulted in the mountainous and hilly regions getting 100 seats, despite having less than 50% of the population. The Tarai region, with over 50% of the population, has been allocated only 65 seats. As a result, no major political party from the Madhesh region has signed the constitution.

The Madhesi community had started an indefinite strike on August 8, anticipating that the new constitution would not do justice to their demands. While the ruling parties celebrated the constitution's declaration, the Madhesi parties observed a black day, highlighting the deep social divisions in Nepal.

To understand this issue, it's essential to know the history and social structure of Madhesh. Until 1954, Madhesis comprised 94% of the population in the Tarai region. However, in the 1960s, King Mahendra started settling people from the hills and mountains in the Tarai region, distributing land to these migrants. This demographic change was aimed at preventing separatism and Indian influence in the region.

The Madhesi issue is also linked to the historical context of Nepal's unification under King Prithvi Narayan Shah and the subsequent Treaty of Sugauli. The treaty's legacy continues to influence Nepal's relations with India.

India's role in the Madhesi issue has been significant, with India openly supporting the Madhesis' demands for rights. The Indian government has allowed Madhesi protesters to block supplies to Nepal, resulting in shortages of essential goods. Nepal has accused India of imposing an economic blockade, and Nepalese citizens have protested against India at the Indian Embassy in Kathmandu.

Nepal has also sought Chinese support, signing an agreement with China to import petroleum products. However, this comes at a higher cost due to China's geographical distance. Nepal has also approached the United Nations, seeking assistance in accessing the sea route for imports.

The Nepal-India relationship is unique, with citizens of both countries allowed to travel and work without passports and visas. Nepalese citizens have served in the Indian government and army, and thousands are still serving in the Indian Army.

Recently, Nepal announced visa-free entry for Chinese citizens, but it's unlikely that China will reciprocate with similar concessions. Nepal's relations with China may provide an alternative, but it comes with its own set of challenges and costs.

The Nepalese cabinet has agreed to amend the constitution to provide greater representation to the Madhesis. The Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi has invited Nepal's Prime Minister KP Sharma Oli to India, and it remains to be seen how the situation unfolds.

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